



Visitors Will Come, But Let's Look at the Facts

Comments of Matthew Cohn, Travel Montana Director, and Kim McMahon, Research Associate, Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research

"Lewis & Clark bicentennial could flood the state with tourists," reads a February 11, 2000 headline from the Flathead Business Journal. "The numbers are amazing - almost scary," began a February 8, 2000 Billings Gazette article. The question is, who are these tourists and where did these numbers come from?

Preliminary results from a recent survey conducted by the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) reports that an estimated 10.7 million - 18.7 million nonresident tourists will visit Montana during the Lewis and Clark bicentennial in 2005 and 2006. But what do these numbers actually mean? Based on established trends of a two percent increase in nonresident visitation annually, researchers expect a minimum of 10.7 million people visiting Montana in 2005, regardless of the Lewis and Clark bicentennial. To put this in context, Montana hosted 9.5 million visitors in 1999. Realistically though, the actual number of visitors that Montana will host in 2005 and 2006 will be somewhere between 10.7 million and 18.7 million. However, the reality is if the upper end of these figures holds true it goes well beyond our current preparation and infrastructure capabilities. But, before we make hasty policy decisions that we may come to regret, let's take a look at a few factors that may cause these preliminary ITRR Lewis and Clark numbers to change.

- First and foremost, ITRR stresses that these numbers are PRELIMINARY and are the first look at the first set of data on potential Lewis and Clark visitation. Caution should be taken when making any data conclusions.
- The preliminary numbers included those respondents who expressed any amount of interest in Lewis and Clark events, including those who were not very interested. The estimates also include respondents who expressed some amount—large or small—of desire to visit Montana for the events. Looking at only those who indicated they were very interested in Montana Lewis and Clark events will substantially decrease the estimated number of visitors.
- The event is a few years away and it is still very early in terms of trip planning for many of the respondents. Experience has taught us that the nature of responses varies with the timeframe before the event actually occurs.
- This study did not inform respondents that the Lewis and Clark Trail exists in other states. Therefore, results are likely to be overestimated when compared to future study results that include Montana Lewis and Clark sites and events alongside those of other Trail States. Montana is involved in a multi-state research project that is expected to be completed in May, 2000 that should give a more comprehensive look at the potential for Lewis and Clark visitation along the entire Trail.

It is true that visitors are going to come to the state. Exactly how many will come remains unclear. What is clear is that Montana is ahead of other states in its efforts to prepare for and make projections about this event. In fact, other states are calling us to ask what we are doing and what we expect to see in coming years.

The 1997 Legislature authorized the creation of the Lewis and Clark Commission currently financed by Montana's "bed tax." The goal of this group is to commemorate this significant event in a way that benefits our people, communities, and visitors while creating a legacy that future Montanans can enjoy. The Commission has received input from around the state and is in the process of finalizing the master plan for the commemoration. Travel Montana has been marketing the Lewis and Clark journey so as to spread tourists across the entire state to benefit many of our rural communities, Indian reservations and small businesses. Lastly, Montana is working with other Lewis and Clark states to better coordinate our joint promotional Lewis & Clark efforts.

So before we jump to conclusions and institute policies based on a potential 18 million visitors flooding our state, we must sit back and put the figures in perspective. Like Lewis and Clark who ventured upon a land unknown, Montana must also prepare itself to take the unforeseen challenges that come our way, based on sound judgement and a reasoned approach.

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Become M2K Compliant: Attend Year 2000 Governor's Conference

M2K: The Montana Millennium is the theme for the 26th annual Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation, April 10-11, 2000 at Big Sky. New and growing opportunities for Montana's tourism businesses and organizations; visitor and resident views of Montana's tourism offerings; Lewis & Clark Bicentennial planning and perspectives; website marketing; packaging successful tourism products and Montana's tourism education resources are some of the topics to be covered at the two-day conference.

Conference Highlights

Monday, April 10

• **Opening Session: Generation Transitional Marketing**

Phil Goodman of the Boomer Marketing & Research Center in San Diego is a national expert on psychographics—the mindset—of the "Baby Boomer" Market. He will provide insights on how to effectively market to Boomers and a variety of generations interested in travel.

• **Luncheon Presentation:** Minnesota Tourism Director, Steve Markuson will discuss how his state is utilizing Governor Jesse Ventura's colorful image and media appeal to promote their state to the nation and the world.

Tuesday April 11

• **Opening Session: "Tourism: In the Eyes of Montanans"**

Former Travel Montana Director John Wilson, now with the Montana Land Reliance, Cary

Hegreberg of the Montana Wood Products Association, Jim Peterson with the Montana Stockgrowers Association, and Mike Jenson, an artist/gallery operator and former Whitefish mayor, will provide their perspectives on tourism in Montana.

• **Luncheon Presentation:** Doug Monger, State Parks Division Manager, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks provides a look back at where the state park system has been and where it is going.

Big Sky Bonus

• **Ski Package Discounts!** The Big Sky Resort is offering discounted ski packages to everyone registered for The Governor's Conference. You must be registered for the conference to receive these discounts.

Saturday-Thursday, April 8-13:

• \$25 lift tickets; ski rentals: \$16 beginners, \$18 intermediate, \$20 advanced.

Monday-Wednesday, April 10-12:

• 20% discount on ski lessons. Ask for these discounts at Big Sky's Snowcrest Day Lodge lift ticket and ski rental shop.



Pumped Up

There has been a lot of talk these days about how higher fuel prices will effect tourism. Will these higher prices mean fewer tourists to Montana? "We don't think so," says Travel Montana Director, Matthew Cohn. He explains that the average Montana visitor travels 2,500 miles round trip. If their automobile gets 15 miles to the gallon and the price of gas goes up 40 cents, that adds on an extra \$60 to the cost of the trip. "I don't

think \$60 is going to deter people from traveling," says Cohn. "National data suggests these are strong economic times. I believe consumers can handle a slight increase in travel expenses."

Don't Be Left Out in the Cold

The 2000/2001 edition of the Montana Winter Guide is in the works. If you are involved in the state's winter recreation industry and you would like to advertise in the guide, contact Travel Montana's

Susan Albrecht at (406) 444-1617 for details. Deadline for advertising is May 1, 2000.

Calendar of Events

April

- 10-11 Governor's Conference on Tourism & Recreation, Big Sky
- 12 MTRI Working Group Meeting, Big Sky
- 18-19 Affordable Meetings West, San Jose, CA

May

- 5-7 Northern Rockies Cineposium 2000, West Yellowstone
- 7-13 National Tourism Week

*For all of the latest Montana tourism industry information log on to
Travel Montana's Intranet site: travelmontana.state.mt.us.*

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